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著者	中野 道雄
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CULTURAL AND KINESIC NOTES ON JAPANESE COMMUNICATIVE BEHAVIOUR

Michio NAKANO

R.L. Birdwhistell, the founder of the science of kinesics, early in his research, 'had been attracted to a simple theory which saw "verbal" communication as subject to (and responsible for) human diversification while "nonverbal" communication provided a primitive and underlying base for (and was the resultant of) human unity.' Smiling, it seemed to him, 'provided the perfect example of a behaviour bit which in every culture expressed pleasure... on the part of the actor.' However, as his research advanced, he found that this was not true. The implications of smiling were various - from positive to negative - and different from culture to culture. They were not the same even between different areas in the United States. 'In one part of the country, an unsmiling individual might be queried as to whether he was "angry about something," while in another, the smiling individual might be asked, "What's funny?" In one area, an apology required an accompanying smile; in another, the smile elicited the response that the apology was not "serious."¹⁾

A British author writes: 'I spent a year of my student life in France, and so got into the habit of shaking hands with everyone I met. But shaking hands is not so common in England. English people usually only shake hands when they are being formally introduced, and to shake hands with everyone one meets is considered

1) R.L. Birdwhistell, *Kinesics and Context*, pp. 29-31.

foreign and affected. So on my return to England after a year in France I quite automatically kept holding out my right hand to my friends and relations, who would look at me in perplexity. It took me some time to learn English body language again.²⁾

An American girl student staying in Japan tells me that she is surprised how often she is asked to shake hands here. In the States, she says, women do not shake hands so often. But apparently, she presumes, Japanese have a preconception that Americans shake hands on almost every occasion they meet.

Today, hand-shaking in Western style and connotations prevails in many non-western countries including Japan. Japanese may shake hands (often accompanied by an unnecessary, unconscious bow) with foreigners, and even among themselves – for example, in the case of politicians and supporters, singers and admirers, and so on. However, they do not shake hands on their everyday life level. Bowing is still the most usual greeting action for them.

But this should not be confused with ‘taking someone’s hands in one’s hands.’ See the following passage from Ian Fleming’s *You Only Live Twice* :

Farewells were brief. ... Bond thanked the Superintendent and was wished good fortune in his honourable endeavours. Tiger looked serious. He took Bond’s hand in both of his, an unusual gesture for a Japanese. He said, ‘Bond-san, I am certain you will succeed, so I will not wish you luck. ...’³⁾

Japanese do not shake hands as a farewell gesture, but they take each other’s hands as an expression of strong sympathetic feelings. In the above scene, Tiger took Bond’s hand as such a gesture, and this type of hand-taking is *not* unusual among Japanese.

Even from these random observations we notice that the se-

2) James Kirkup, *Japanese Themes and Scenes*, pp. 50-51.

3) Triad/Granada, 1978, p. 125.

mantics of a nation's communicative behaviour is not so simple and that we need to examine carefully many more cases and examples before we say something general or theoretical about it.

This article is part of my study of Japanese communicative patterns. I will take up some examples from Japanese literary works and newspapers and explain from the cultural and kinesics point of view, the implications of speech and behaviour described explicitly or implicitly in the quoted passages. In the last section I will point out the concept lying under these communicative actions.

Instead of speaking from where he was, he politely walked to the most humble position with a low bow to everyone, and made the following speech :

'I have recently decided to move to Kyushu for personal reasons and I would like to say how deeply touched I am, gentlemen, that you should have given me this truly magnificent farewell party. I shall never forget it. I am particularly grateful for the kind things said about me by the headmaster and the second master and the other gentlemen; and I would like you to know that those words will always remain with me. Although I shall be far away, I hope that you won't forget me, but will remember me with the kindness you have always shown me.' Koga bowed low again - virtually prostrating himself, and then returned to his place.

NATUME Soseki, *Botchan*⁴⁾

This is a scene of a highschool teachers' party given to one of their colleagues, named Koga, who is going to move to a far place.

4) For this work, I quoted Alan Turney's translation (Kodansha International, 1984) with some alterations. The aim of my modification is to get the more literal rendering for the present purpose. This passage is found in the Kodansha book, at p. 131.

'Botchan,' the nickname given to the hero of this novel, is a polite word to address or refer to a boy.

In a Japanese party or any kind of meeting, it is a very important matter to find a proper seat for one. In this scene, as explained in one of the preceding paragraphs of the novel, the headmaster – the most important person among the participants – takes the best place in the room (i.e. the position where he can sit with the alcove at his back) and the second master on his left, and Koga on his right. Koga's real position among them is not so important, but he is given the third place as the evening's guest of honour. However, when he gives his address of thanks, he must go to the lowest place, which is usually nearest to the door to the room and farthest from the most important place. The teachers are sitting in a posture called *agura*, sitting on their buttocks, legs crossed. But Koga must kneel, while he is making his speech, because it is the formal position, and when he finishes it, he makes the deepest bow, knees, hands, and forehead touching the floor.

This novel was written in 1906, but these practices are very common and usual even today. The reader should also note that Koga's speech is a typical one given on such occasions.

Koga was going the rounds, exchanging drinks with people. It looked as though he intended to do it with everyone. What a job! When he came to me he knelt and, arranging the folds of his *hakama*⁵⁾ correctly, asked me for my *saké* cup. I sat up in the formal position, although it was uncomfortable in my trousers, and poured him a drink.

*Ibid.*⁶⁾

Although Koga has already made his speech addressed to all, he must yet give a word of gratitude and farewell to every participant, this time, one by one. He sits in a kneeling position in front of each person and exchanges tiny *saké* cups, (i. e. A [the person

5) Traditional loose, skirt-like trousers with many, deep pleats, worn on formal occasions.

6) Turney's translation (p. 132).

in the higher position] hands his cup to B [the lower] and pours *saké* in the cup, which is meanwhile held by B, and B drinks it up, and returns the cup to A, and pours in the same way, and A drinks it up). During the exchange, Koga is kneeling and Botchan ('I') also takes the same position, because he wants to be polite to Koga.

'... You must make sure that when your husband returns you come and let me know. Today is the first time I've ever begged you to do anything for me. But now, I beg of you - look, I am placing my hands before me on the floor.' Then I made a bow.

DAZAI Osamu, "Lies"

One makes a bow when one entreats someone for something. In this story, a young soldier has run away from the army during the wartime. His older relative come to the soldier's wife and asks her to let him know if her husband appears there. By saying 'look, I am placing my hands before me on the floor,' the relative is going to let her notice that, though he is older and a man (while she is younger and a woman) he is taking such a demeaning posture and that he is so serious and the matter is so important. Putting one's hands on the floor while in a kneeling position suggests that one is going on to make a very deep bow.

'Well, what do you think of Mr. Mōri, the new teacher?' asked Mr. Tamba.

'His English is not so good - says everyone,' answered a student, fidgeting with a baseball mitt. Unusually for a wild boy, he said it very shyly and timidly. Mr Tamba, flapping sand off his trousers with a handkerchief, said with a triumphant air: 'Is his English worse than yours?'

'Oh, no, of course, he is better than me.'

'Then you can't complain!'

The boy did not have the courage to retort. He scratched

his head with the hand wearing his mitt, and hid himself behind the other students.

AKUTAGAWA Ryunosuke, "Mr Mōri"

This is a typical gesture of a Japanese boy to show that he admits his fault or mistake, and to ask his teacher or parent to be lenient to him.

In the above passage, the boy student, invited by Mr Tamba's leading question, gives his critical opinion on a new teacher, and is told ironically to know his place.

Hidesaburo Hanafusa, professor at the Rockefeller University, U.S.A., read his paper on cancer viruses at the International Cell Technology Symposium held in Kobe recently. Afterwards Dr Hanafusa was seen scratching his head when he was highly praised by his old teacher, Dr Shiro Akabori, ex-president of Osaka University.

The Mainichi Newspaper (August 8, 1982)

This is a gesture, typically made when a person is praised or admired. The implication is 'Well, thanks for your kind words about me, but I am not sure if I am so good.' In other words, the person pretends to be puzzled, though he may be really pleased, as if to say: 'I am puzzled how to react, as I know that I am not worth it.'

The same interpretation may be applied to the boy's head-scratching in the preceding example. The boy says subconsciously that he is puzzled how to apologize.

Compare the following head-scratching example from an American novel:

'... and next, maybe you can give me a hand with the Washington Monument.' Gold found himself peering at Ralph again.

'In what way, Ralph?'

'It's been bothering me, Bruce, ever since I got here.'

Ralph scratching his head mournfully. 'It reminds me of something, and I can't for the life of me remember what – not a phallic symbol, but something else.'

Joseph Heller, *Good as Gold*⁷⁾

This is a gesture which accompanies thinking, especially when one is unable to remember or find an answer or to make a decision. So it is also an idiom to mean the state of being puzzled as in the following example:

The finding of so little matter in so much space had cosmologists all over the world scratching their heads.

TIME (October 12, 1981)

Although head-scratching is basically a gesture to show one's state of being puzzled in both Japanese and British-American kinesic systems, it is a conscious gesture in the former, while it is an unconscious body movement in the latter.

The narrator of the following story is a twenty-year-old higher school student⁸⁾. He is travelling alone in the Izu Peninsula. He begins to speak to a group of travelling entertainers, who are also walking along the same road.

'He's a student,' one of the young women whispered to the little dancer. When I glanced back, she smiled and said, 'Aren't you? Even we know that much. Students come to the island often.' They were from Oshima in the Izu Islands, ...

KAWABATA Yasunari, *The Izu Dancer*⁹⁾

7) Corgi Books, 1980, p. 277.

8) A type of school placed between high schools and universities in the old Japanese educational system. As 'elite,' the students were respected and admired by the public in those days.

9) Translation by Edward Seidensticker (Tuttle, 1976). I modified the translation for the present purpose. This passage is at p. 12 in the Tuttle book.

The young woman entertainers are walking a few yards after the student. One of them guesses that he is a higher school student. Hearing this comment on himself, the student looks back over his shoulder. The woman gives him a pleasant smile, and says 'Aren't you? (My guess is right, isn't it?)' She knows that to talk about someone behind his back is bad manners, but also that, in this case, hers is a remark with a tone of admiration, so he will not be offended. 'Even we ...' has a humble nuance as if to say, 'We are local, ignorant people, but ...' She goes on to explain why she can guess: many students wearing the same clothes and caps come to their island on holiday.

The corresponding word to 'smiling' in the original is 'warau.' This word, different from English 'laugh' can be either 'laugh' or 'smile.' Here I presume that she 'smiled' rather than 'laughed.'

We were back in my room when the older of the two young women came to look at the flowers in the garden. The little dancer followed her halfway across the bridge. The middle-aged woman came out of the bath¹⁰⁾ and looked at them. The dancer shrugged her shoulders and ran back, smiling as if to say that she would be scolded if she came any nearer.

¹¹⁾
Ibid.

They are now staying in a spa, at different inns. The little dancer (fourteen years old, as we are told) wants to come to have a chat with the student, but her mother-in-law will not permit her to do so. The reader should notice that she shrugs her shoulder, but not in Western style, in which hands are shown and raised more or less. In a Japanese shrug, arms are just hanging down along the side of the body, and shoulders are raised, neck drawn in

10) A hot spring for public use, partly enclosed with simple walls.

11) Seidensticker's translation (p. 16).

between the shoulders. A simili 'like a tortoise' is idiomatically used for the description of this gesture. The usual implication is 'I admit I am wrong.' In this case, with her smile and gesture, the girl delivers to the student, who is looking out of the upstairs window, the silent message: 'My mother-in-law is so strict, so ...' and at the same time, to her mother-in-law, 'I know I shouldn't go. I will now come back.'

'Shall we turn back?' Redshirt asked, as though it had suddenly occurred to him. Yoshikawa said that it was exactly the right time and went on to ask Redshirt if he was going to meet the Madonna that evening. Redshirt who had leaning over the side of the boat, straightening up a little and told him not to talk silly, because it might lead to a misunderstanding. Yoshikawa looked round at me, gave a girlish giggle and said, 'It's all right. Even if he did hear...' I glared straight at him, my eyes flashing. He looked as though he were being blinded by a bright light and fell back. He drew in his neck, scratching his head and muttered something about surrendering. Dim-witted fool!

12)
NATUME Soseki, *Botchan*

The three schoolmasters are fishing on the sea, in a rowing boat. Yoshikawa flatters Redshirt, the second master, by referring to a woman whom he loves. The second master wonders if it is all right for them to have Botchan hear that. Yoshikawa assures him that they need not worry about Botchan, implying that such an insignificant person does not have the courage to take any action at whatever he hears. But Botchan, a simple and righteous man gives Yoshikawa a hard stare, as if to say: 'I will never close my eyes to a scandal like that!' Yoshikawa flinches at this unexpected strong reaction from Botchan and tries to laugh away the awkward

12) Turney's translation (p. 70).

situation by making a comical gesture. He literally falls down from the sitting position, on his back, on the board of the rowing boat. He draws in his neck and scratches his head and, probably, pulls his knees to his stomach.

Compare the following passage :

‘Can I give a hand, old soul?’ Toby solicitously asked.

‘You can *not*,’ Dubedat fiercely replied and Toby dodged back pretending he had received a blow. He said, ‘Crumbs!’

¹³⁾
Olivia Manning. *Friends and Heroes*

These two examples are the same in that the person makes an exaggerated gesture to admit that the opposite’s ‘blow’ is hard.

‘If ever a man had the look of a feudal lord, it was Maeda. Still does, I imagine. Surely he must have retired, though.’ Otani shrugged. ‘Well, yes and no. He’s no longer the President of the Maeda Trading Company, but he’s still Chairman of the Board and quite active, ...’

¹⁴⁾
James Melville, *A Sort of Samurai*

In this novel, Otani, a Japanese police superintendent, shrugs, meaning ‘yes and no.’ But it is not likely that a real Japanese would shrug in a context like this. Japanese shrug (i.e. become small) against the opposite’s angry or admonitory words or actions, as we might shrink against a sudden, big sound or a cold, strong wind.

See the next passages from an American novel for the various meanings of shrugging :

‘If Mr. Wells had a better room why was he asked to move?’

13) Penguin Books, 1980, p. 31.

14) Methuen, 1982, p. 8.

The bellboy shrugged. 'You'd better ask the room clerks that.'

Arthur Hailey, *Hotel*¹⁵⁾

'You want money, don't you? You came here to blackmail us.'

If she expected her words to shock, they did not succeed. The house detective shrugged. 'All I come for was to help people outa place. But I got to live too.'

Ibid.

'Assuming we paid this grotesque amount, what would we receive in return?'

The fat man seemed puzzled. 'Like I said, I keep quiet about what I know.'

'And the alternative?'

He shrugged. 'I go down the lobby. I pick up a phone.'

Ibid.

Western shrugs express 'don't know,' indifference, or contempt. Naturally, in many cases, they will not be pleasant gestures to the person at whom the gesture is directed. On the other hand, a Japanese shrug, most typically made by a girl, is taken as 'lovable' and 'charming.'

The common concept behind these Japanese gestures as a means of interpersonal communication is admitting the opposite's superior and one's inferior positions.

lowering one's head (bowing) ... 'You are superior to me.'

scratching one's head ... 'I admit I am wrong. I am puzzled
how to apologize.'

shrugging (drawing in one's neck) ... 'I am afraid of you.'

15) Bantam Books, 1981, p. 15, p. 124, p. 127, respectively.

Smiling in one of the above examples is not a gesture of this type, but the smiling woman's attitude and words are the exact expression of the same feelings. ('We admire you. You are superior to us.')

The function of these gestures is to avoid unnecessary confrontation or tension between individuals and keep peaceful relations. The same way of thinking may exist in every culture, but it is given the major role in the system of Japanese communicative behaviour.

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and pp. 246-7.

"Lies," (Uso) *Villon no Tsuma • Sakurambo*, (Iwanami Bunko) Iwanami Shoten, p. 41,

"Mr Mori," (Mōri Sensei) *Akutagawa Ryunosuke Zenshu*, Iwanami Shoten (1977 edition), vol. 2, p. 405.

The Izu Dancer (Izu no Odoriko), (Shincho Bunko), Shinchosha, p. 13, and p. 19.